DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 394 CE 028 137

AUTHOR Bachman, Jerald G.
TITLE Schooling as a Credential: Some Suggestions for Change. An Issue Paper.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Symposium on Schooling and Youth Unemployment (Sept 6-7, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Credentials; *Educational Attainment; Educational Background; Educational Certificates; Educational Status Comparison; *Education Work Relationship; Graduation; *Minimum Competency Testing; National Competency Tests; *Out of School Youth; Part Time Employment; Student Certification; Student Employment; Unemployment; Work Experience; *Youth Employment; Youth Problems

ABSTRACT

Schooling has been overused as a credential, and the way to reduce the credential value of sheer years of schooling is to provide better alternative credentials. Research findings indicate high unemployment among those who have not attained a high school diploma. A productive approach toward reducing this overemphasis on diplomas and years of schooling is to develop better, more functional credentials so that employers have a more reliable basis for judging applicants. Two alternative credentials are based on early employment (part-time jobs) and competency testing. A suggestion for facilitating the development and use of competency testing is that the National Institute of Education undertake a major research and development program to prepare very large pools of items appropriate for use in basic competency testing programs and then make these item pools available to the public without restriction. The paper, Competency Testing: Avoiding Some of The Pitfalls, is appended. (YLB)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED198394

# SCHOOLING AS A CREDENTIAL:

# SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

An issue paper prepared for

the Symposium on Schooling and Youth Unemployment

September 6-7, 1979

Jerald G. Bachman

The University of Michigan
(Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research)

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jerald G. Bachman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CE028137

NOTE: I have drawn very heavily on earlier writing in preparing this memorandum, particularly a volume coauthored with Patrick O'Malley and Jerome Johnston (Youth in Transition: Volume VI, Adolescence to Adulthood: Change and Stability in the Lives of Young Men. Ann Arbor, Institute for Social Research, 1978). I am indebted to a number of colleagues who have provided comments on various portions of the material presented here: Terrence Davidson, Jerome Johnston, Lloyd Johnston, Thomas Juster, and Patrick O'Malley. Of course, the responsibility for what has been included in the memorandum is mine alone.

SCHOOLING AS A CREDENTIAL: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

This symposium is concened with schooling and youth unemployment. More specifically, contributors have been asked what is known about the impact of schooling on employment prospects, and what recommendations can be offered for improving the impact of schooling. One cannot cover that at all comprehensively in a short memorandum, and I am not going to try. Instead, I will concentrate on what I consider to be the most fundamental aspect of the relationship between education and employment in the contemporary United States: the credential value attached to "educational attainment"--attainment measured primarily in terms of diplomas and years of schooling. I will argue that schooling has been overused as a credential, and that the way to reduce the credential value of sheer years of schooling is to provide better alternative credentials. I will then offer some suggestions about such alternative credentials.

What is Known about the Relationship between Schooling and Employment?

Probably the most general finding relating education to employment is that greater amounts of schooling are associated with higher status jobs. Part of the explanation is that individuals high in ability and motivation are more likely to attain greater amounts of schooling as well as better jobs. But there is also evidence that after controlling for background, ability, and (insofar as possible) motivation, there is still a substantial "value added" in terms of the contribution of schooling to job status. The more popular explanation of this value added is that schooling provides a socializing or training function--the particular knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes developed through the schooling process help individuals to secure high status jobs. That is almost certainly true to some extent. But I think the evidence increasingly suggests that the primary value added by schooling is its credential value--schooling provides individuals with a form of certification which (above and beyond their ability, motivation, and knowledge) entitles them to better jobs. (It also entitles them to the extra measure of respect and deference often accorded to "educated people.")

What about the impact of schooling on youth unemployment? Here the research findings are somewhat more specific. Unemployment is particularly high among those who have not attained a high school diploma. Compared with those who have completed high school, dropouts are about twice as likely to be unemployed. My colleagues and I carried out a nationwide longitudinal study of young men in the high school class of 1969, following them from tenth grade (1966) to a point five years after most had graduated (1974). We paid particular attention to the impact of dropping out of high school. When we compared those without a diploma with those who completed high school but did not go on to college, we found some personality and behavioral differences which had been present before

tenth grade--for example, dropouts averaged very slightly lower in self-esteem and appreciably higher in delinquency. And, of course, we found the higher levels of unemployment that just about everyone has found in research on dropouts. But in their late teens and early twenties, the large majority of dropouts were not unemployed. And it is noteworthy that the employed dropouts averaged just about the same levels of pay, status, and job satisfaction as those who entered the labor force right after high school graduation. (We found this at two different points in time--one year after graduation and five years after graduation.)

What implications derive from these findings? Certainly one implication is that exhorting potential dropouts to complete high school in order to get a better job is misleading. A high school diploma will cut the risk of unemployment; but to get a qualitatively better job, it is necessary to go on to college. Another implication is that the majority of high school dropouts are probably no better or worse as employees than are those whose education stopped with a high school diploma. If they were, presumably some appreciable differences in status and wages would be evident by the time they reach their early twenties. But if most dropouts are just as good employees as high school graduates, then why do dropouts have the much higher unemployment rate? I can distinguish two possible explanations.

1. Some dropouts may simply lack the abilities and/or motivation to work. The same qualities which led them not to finish high school now prevents them from finding or keeping jobs.

2. Jobs are harder to find for dropouts because some employers use the high school diploma as a screening device--even though it is often not directly relevant to actual performance on the job.

Both explanations are probably true to some extent. Surely a few dropouts are misfits in the world of work; they were unable to fit well into educational institutuions and they do not fit well into occupational institutions either. (And it is not at all clear that keeping such individuals in school for another year or two and granting them diplomas would change these qualities appreciably.) But most dropouts should not be written off as misfits. Whatever the reasons that the educational environment did not provide a congenial fit, it does not follow that dropouts in general do not fit into the occupational environment. To the contrary, our findings indicate that dropouts are just as happy with their work environments as are the high school graduates. It is thus difficult to escape the conclusion that the high unemployment rate for dropouts is due in large measure to the use of educational attainment as a credential in the job market, rather than being due to any more fundamental limitations in ability, motivation, or specific skills.

Other evidence can be cited to support the view that schooling has its impact on occupational attainment largely through its credential value, but I would rather turn my attention now to the question of whether the present emphasis on schooling as a credential should be changed, and how that might be done.

For a variety of reasons, the last several generations of young people in the United States have been told that if they want to "do better" they should get more education. Increasingly the emphasis was placed on the degree, the credential, with proportionately less emphasis on the content of the educational experience. Among the results of this trend have been: 1. a substantial increase in the proportion of individuals who reach each level of educational attainment; 2. probably some reduction in the quality of ability, knowledge, and performance represented by each such level; and 3. a decrease in the relative payoff value of each educational level and credential. If sheer time spent in schooling were to lose some of its credential value, if it were replaced (at least partially) by alternative forms of credentials, one of the most desirable side effects would be that educational institutions could focus greater attention on the socializing functions for which they were designed. Other desirable side effects would be (a) a reduction in the cynicism that presently results from "serving time" in education so as to collect one's credential, and (b) an impetus toward making students and teachers more like allies and less like adversaries (more about that later).

Policy Recommendations.

Clearly my preference is to reduce the simplistic reliance on educational credentials (i.e., degrees, number of years of schooling) in the process of sorting people into jobs--particularly the use of the high school diploma as a basis for granting young people entrance into decent jobs. But merely asserting that we ought to do that will not accomplish much. Legislation against the misuse of educational credentials is a possibility, but then the question arises as to what other sorting mechanism will take its place. I think a more productive approach toward reducing the overemphasis on diplomas and years of schooling is to develop better, more functional credentials so that employers have a more reliable basis for judging applicants than the presence or absence of a diploma certifying twelve years of attendance in school. I want to mention two such alternative credentials.

Credentials Based on Early Employment.

The large majority of high school seniors, both male and female, hold part-time jobs. Those jobs are often the basis for claiming some degree of "work experience" when the students have graduated and are looking for "real" jobs rather than student jobs. Although the specific training value of the typical student job is rather limited, it can still provide a way of building a record as a reliable, responsible employee. And if such a job credential were increasingly used and recognized, it might make students more conscientious about the early employment records they are creating, and it could also make their employers a bit more careful about providing opportunities for successful performance and fair appraisals of such performance.

Schools may be able to play a more active role in this process than they currently do. At the federal level I think a modest investment in some research and development work in this area, and then perhaps some (again modest) assistance to schools in setting up such systems, could go

a long way toward beefing up the credential value of early employment experiences.

Credentials Based on Competency Testing.

Now we come to the controversial part of this memorandum. Let me first say straight out that I think competency testing has a great potential for positive contribution to education in general, and to an improved linkage between schooling and employment. It also has the potential for all sorts of mischief and abuse, and many people and organizations concerned with education in the United States are thus very worried about "the competency testing movement." I take those worries seriously; in fact, I have included an appendix to this memorandum which suggests ways of avoiding some of the pitfalls in competency testing. In balance, nevertheless, I am clearly persuaded that competency tests can have largely positive effects.

From the standpoint of the potential employer, the high school diploma is supposed to certify some reasonable minimal degree of competency in "the basics"--reading, writing, and arithmetic. The graduate may have learned a great deal more in school; but except for specific vocational training courses, that additional learning may not matter to the prospective employer. The difficulty from the employer's standpoint is the uncertainity about what the diploma really represents--is the graduate competent or did he or she simply "serve time?" A credential certifying successful completion of a competency testing program (I refer to a passing score, not a percentile score or ranking) might be a good deal more attractive to employers than a vague diploma--particularly if the employers had a good idea of what the test covered (more about that in a moment).

From the standpoint of the student, I see credentials based on competency testing as having a good deal more "face validity" than serving time for a diploma. And although competency testing may be a source of anxiety for some students, it also represents a challenge--a specific goal to work toward.

In the area of student-teacher relationships I think competency testing can lead to great improvements. Among the unfortunate side effects of our present educational credentialism is a kind of adversary relationship, with the students trying whatever tricks will yield passing grades (with the least possible effort), while the teachers are trying to keep one up on the students (and often trying their own cute tricks in the examinations they write). Consider how competency testing could change that adversary relationship. The teacher becomes a helper and guide for the student preparing for the examination. The student provides much of the task-motivation rather than relying on the teacher to do so. In those subject areas for which it is appropriate, competency testing could thus lead to reduced emphasis on classroom grades--perhaps even their elimination. Of course, many areas of schooling--art appreciation, music history, and a variety of other culturally enriching courses are not appropriate for inclusion in basic competency testing. But, by the same token, they are largely inappropriate as bases for credentials in the job market. Thus, I believe that an across-the-board deemphasis on classroom grades coupled with the

selective use of competency testing would result in better credentials and, as a side effect, much better working conditions for both students and teachers.

A Modest Suggestion for Facilitating the Development and Use of Competency Testing.

I recognize that there is great concern and hesitancy about the possibility of the national government becoming involved in setting competency test standards. There are also concerns about test secrecy and the abuses which can result. There are concerns about coaching for tests. And there are concerns about student anxiety when faced with a "make-or-break" test situation. I should like to offer a simple proposal that would go a long way toward dealing with all of these concerns and others as well. I propose that the National Institute of Education undertake a major research and development program to prepare very large pools of items appropriate for use in basic competency testing programs, and then make these item pools available to the public without restriction!

Consider some of the implications of such an approach: (a) States and/or local school districts could determine which subsets of items in the pools represent appropriate levels of competency. Particular tests, of course, would use only very small proportions of the items in any pool, and thus many alternate forms of any test could be developed. (b) There would always be the possibility for moving toward some broader regional or even national consensus about minimum competency. (c) Teachers, students, parents, school board members, employers, and others could all systematically examine the items in the pools and propose rejection (for their school) of any items they consider inappropriate. (d) Students and teachers could study and practice using items that would actually appear on the tests (but the pools of items should be so large that rote memorization is totally unfeasible). (e) Different test forms could be developed by drawing samples from the item pools, thereby providing for retesting sufficiently often that students can try and try again until they both master the material and overcome their anxiety.

The technology for printing and scoring optically-scanned test booklets is highly developed and could readily be employed in the manner I've suggested. The development of the item pools would, of course, be a major expense--and it seems most appropriate that such an expense be undertaken at the national level rather than at state or local levels. I think that the companies which presently develop and copyright tests would be ideal contractors for the development of such item pools, but I suspect that they might have some difficulties adjusting to the new mode of operation I am proposing. Perhaps I underestimate them. I hope so.

I can imagine this being perceived as a radical proposal, although my own view is that it is really somewhat conservative since it provides for public discussion and many checks and balances that would otherwise be missing. I am not yet sure it is worth doing, but I do think it is worth considering.

## APPENDIX

### COMPETENCY TESTING: AVOIDING SOME OF THE PITFALLS

The "mental testing movement" in the United States has experienced some wide swings in popularity and support, perhaps in large measure because some proponents and practitioners oversold tests and what they could do. When it was found that tests could not live up to the exaggerated claims that some made for them, then they were in disrepute. It may be too much to hope for, given some of the razzle-dazzle that has already surrounded competency testing; nevertheless, we should strive for moderation both in developing such tests and testing programs, and in selling them to legislators, school boards, educators, parents, and students. (Yes, I do think there ought to be some explicit effort to sell such testing to students, rather than simply foisting it upon them. But I think it has to be a well-reasoned and realistic selling job, not a snow job.) Let us consider a few specifics:

Competency Tests Cannot Do Everything. It is crucial to distinguish between competency tests and present achievement tests and aptitude tests. One key distinction is that general-purpose achievement and aptitude tests are designed to make a wide range of discriminations among those taking the tests; in order to do so such tests have items covering a wide range of difficulty; and when things work out according to plan, the result is a wide spread of test scores. Minimum competency tests, on the other hand, should concentrate on a much narrower range of difficulty (whatever can be defined as a "minimum" level of competency); consequently, a considerable number of students (those who clearly exceed the minimal levels of competency) should be lumped together with very high scores. The failure to discriminate among such students means that the minimum competency test will not provide meaningful "percentile scores" because students are likely to be lumped together into just two groups--those who pass and those who fail. (There may be something to be said for other kinds of competency tests that go beyond minimum levels; however, that is a different matter and ought not be confused with minimum competency testing.)

Another thing competency tests are not likely to do is measure more subtle things such as artistic ability or capacity for aesthetic appreciation, creativity of other sorts, initiative, responsibility, and a host of additional things that may well be among the proper goals of a broad-guage educational experience. So be it. Just because competency testing cannot measure all the desirable outcomes of education doesn't mean it should be abandoned; rather it should be taken in perspective.

Must Such Tests Be Traumatic? There is probably no avoiding the fact that competency testing will be traumatic for some students. But there is much room for reducing the trauma. One way is to reduce the real risk or danger involved in failure. I see little reason why a student could not try a competency test a number of times during the course of any

school year--perhaps even as often as once a month. Different test forms would be required, of course, but that is a relatively easy problem to handle. Perhaps students should take their first crack at such tests relatively early in high school, or even junior high school. Those who pass can get on with other things. Those who do not pass when first they try will have plenty of time to work on the necessary skills.

There's no getting around the fact that paper-and-pencil multiple-choice will seem cold and impersonal to some students. But I think that having the students and teachers working together to "beat the test" (provided the test is well-designed) is much preferable to the present situation in which some students must, in effect, "beat the teacher" in order to get a kind of certification of competency.

When thinking about test trauma, student motivation, and the like, it may be useful to consider another kind of competency testing that looms large in the lives of most high school students--the driver's license test. Students taking driver education courses in school are usually given tests and grades, but their performance and grades in the school course are secondary to their concern about how they will do in the test that really counts--the state-administered driver competency test. If passing a minimum competency test in math were a prerequisite to applying for a job as cashier in a fast food chain, one might begin to see a similar dynamic at work. The trauma would surely be there; but those who failed the first time would more often than not try all the harder the next time.

What About "Teaching Toward the Tests?" One of the criticisms leveled against almost any sort of standardized testing of students is that students and teachers would simply focus their efforts on doing well in the tests--and that "education" (more broadly conceived) would somehow suffer as a consequence. Certainly that would be a possibility if a test became all-important. But a program testing competency in basic skills would have some built-in safeguards. Many students would be able to pass such tests with a minimum of fuss and no special preparation at all. And, if the tests were designed to reflect simply passing and failing, and not percentile scores or varying degrees of "doing well," then for most students and teachers there would be no particular incentive to divert a lot of effort toward special preparation for the test--because it clearly would not be needed.

But what about the students who would not so easily pass--or those who would try and fail? Would they and their teachers then be motivated to concentrate on preparing for the tests to a greater extent than would otherwise be the case? I certainly hope so, for that should be the primary point of the whole business--provided the tests and testing programs are carefully designed and administered.

The criticism of "teaching toward the tests" implies that somehow such an effort is a different, narrower, and thus less worthwhile enterprise than "getting a basic education." But that need not be true. For any particular area (math, reading, etc.) it should be possible to design quite a number of alternative forms of the tests, sampling from a very

large pool of items. Indeed, if the pool of items is sufficiently large it could be made available to students and teachers as a study aid! Given a very large pool of items, it is a great deal easier to learn the basic principles rather than try to rote memorize the material. (Some students--and even some teachers--might have to learn that the hard way; the system should be designed to permit that kind of learning too.)

But I hear the critics say, you cannot reduce competency--even minimum competency--to a series of multiple choice items. I do not argue with that. There may be all sorts of things that schools should be teaching that cannot be measured by any kind of test or grading scheme. Nevertheless, there are some kinds of things that can be measured reasonably well with tests, some of those things can be considered among the requirements for minimally competent functioning in our present technological society, and those are the things that competency tests can measure and should. The fact that such tests can't cover everything is not a convincing argument against them.

Who Will Be Blamed for the Failures? One of the reactions against "blaming the victim" in educational failures has been to "blame the system." It is an understandable reaction. Indeed, the general tendency when something goes wrong is to try to fix the blame somewhere. Thus critics worry about whether competency testing will be used to assign blame, and I think this worry is justified. The real problem is that no matter what the initial motivations for instituting them, competency testing programs, like other kinds of testing programs, will provide extra ammunition for those who go around assigning blame.

Some of the suggestions offered above may help to discourage this use (abuse) of competency testing results. If competency tests were geared primarily toward pass-fail distinctions, and if different levels of passing were not reported, then such tests would be less likely to be misused as a method of evaluating schools. (On the other hand, if two schools dealing with students from rather similar backgrounds were found to have quite different proportions falling short of the minimum requirements, it might be a very useful indicator of a problem in need of some remedial action.)

In short, the fact that competency testing is likely to be subject to abuse does not mean that it has been designed for abuse, and that such abuse is the real motivation for instituting it. And it does not mean that we should bring the movement toward competency testing to a screeching halt. But it does mean that more than the usual amount of caution is warranted.

What about Minority Groups? There is a clear risk that minimum competency testing will, at least for a while, reflect some differences among racial and ethnic groups. Certainly this is one of the factors that dictates extra caution in developing and implementing such tests. Test items should be pretested and analyzed carefully to discover which ones show the greatest differences among groups. There should be very

compelling justification for retaining any item which appears to discriminate. On the other hand, the concept of minimum competency seems to imply a "mainstream" culture. Thus it is important to recognize and emphasize that such tests are not measures of intelligence or learning capability; rather, they are measures of specific areas of competency. If some groups average lower in certain of these areas, and if there is widespread agreement that such areas are indeed important for successful functioning in jobs and in society in general, then such test results should not be seen as discriminating or assigning blame, but rather as indicating needs for remedial work.

It seems quite possible that for some "discriminatory" items there will not be agreement that the items reflect genuinely important areas of competency. In such cases it might be the wiser course to drop the items in question. (An alternative strategy might be to include a few such items in a test administration for research purposes only, but not include them in determining minimum requirements. Such an approach would provide an opportunity to demonstrate empirically whether some such items really turn out to be valid predictors of later outcomes.)

Summing up. I have tried to argue that minimum competency testing does not have to be bad. On the contrary, I think it has a number of potential benefits. These include encouraging and facilitating at least minimal levels of student competency, and providing evidence of this to potential employers and others. A well-developed program could have the additional benefits of reducing abuse of schooling as a credential, and improving student motivation and student-teacher relationships.

There are surely pitfalls along the path to minimum competency testing. It is important to realize what such tests are and are not, what they can and cannot do. The testing program needs to be designed so as to reduce trauma for students, minimize racial and ethnic differences, and make "teaching toward the tests" a positive rather than negative feature.

Pervading all of this, there needs to be a "no fault" approach to competency testing. Many groups and individuals will perceive such testing programs as designed to assign blame. The risk of such use may be unavoidable, but much can be done to recognize the risks and the related fears and try to build in safeguards.

In sum, I think the use of tests as both diagnostic and certifying instruments continues to hold great promise as well as great risks. Some see the risks as outweighing the promises--so much so that they would prefer that we not even try. Others are sold on the benefits and pay little heed to the risks. My own view is that it will require a great deal of effort and good will to make competency testing work. It will require an ability to deal with complexities. It will require caution and clear safeguards for students, teachers, and other affected groups. No doubt that is a tall order. It remains to be seen whether we can bring it off, but I believe the effort should be made.